Chapter Title: Agrarians, Vanderbilt
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Book Title: The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture
Book Subtitle: Volume 4: Myth, Manners, and Memory

Agrarians, Vanderbilt

The Vanderbilt (or Nashville) Agrarians were in a sense an extension of the literary circle that came to be known as the Fugitives in the early 1920s. By mid-decade the *Fugitive* magazine of poetry and criticism (1922–25) had ceased publication, and the Fugitives began to disperse. Two of its principal participants, John Crowe Ransom and Donald Davidson, remained on the Vanderbilt faculty and stayed in close touch with other members of the Fugitives, especially Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren. These four were in large part responsible for planning and seeing into print the "southern book" they and others on the Vanderbilt campus talked about sporadically in the late 1920s.

The book was *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930), by Twelve Southerners, the basic statement of the social, economic, political, and cultural position of the Agrarians, often referred to as a "Southern Manifesto." Just as the name *Fugitive* was applied to the magazine that launched a major literary movement, so the designation "agrarian" labeled participants in what many perceived to be a translation of the Fugitive spirit into a related social movement.

The Fugitives had largely ignored politics in their concern with literature, and, according to Donald Davidson, they shifted their focus to social problems because of the Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tenn., in July 1925. The trial involved a contrived violation of a Tennessee statute prohibiting the teaching of evolution in public schools. It was conducted in a circus atmosphere under a powerful spotlight of national publicity designed, in the view of the incipient Agrarians, to ridicule the local culture and humiliate the plain folk of Tennessee. Not until the late 1920s did the conversations and exchanges of letters that followed result in the development of an eclectic manuscript containing contributions by such people as historian Frank Owsley, psychologist Lyle Lanier, political scientist H. C. Nixon, biographer John Donald Wade, and novelists Robert Penn Warren, Stark Young, and Andrew Lytle. Ransom drafted, and the others subscribed to, a short introductory "Statement of Principles," in which the authors declared themselves southerners, "well acquainted with one another and of similar tastes . . . and perhaps only at this moment aware of themselves as a single group of men."

I'll Take My Stand is a defense of a traditional culture with an agricultural economic base threatened by a modern urban-industrial society. Allen Tate was later to refer to a more universal dimension of the book—a defense of religious humanism. The Agrarians eventually admitted that they were stronger on the critical side than they were in articulating positive values and developing practical ways of realizing their goals. The continuing appeal of the Agrarian manifesto is its critique of the centralized state and the modern mass society produced by an expanding industrial order that reduces man to a functional cog in a production machine, ruthlessly exploits nature, and makes a cash agreement the only binding one. The Agrarians are increasingly recognized as

far-sighted, even prophetic, observers rather than the reactionary, impractical supporters of the southern romantic moonlight-and-magnolias myth that many early critics accused them of being. Their failure to question racial segregation, nonetheless, complicates their embrace by some critics.

As a movement Agrarianism made little or no headway, although some effort was made to expand the public's awareness of its main doctrines. In the early 1930s Ransom in particular debated prominent critics of the Agrarians before surprisingly large audiences in several cities. He also devoted himself to the pursuit of economic study with a view to producing a treatise on agrarian economics, but the project never went beyond a draft stage. For several years various members of the group were actively engaged in social and political criticism, much of which appeared in the *American Review*. Their last major group publication was *Who Owns America?* (1936), jointly edited by Herbert Agar and Allen Tate. In this book, essays by a substantial majority of the Agrarians were published with contributions from various English Distributists, whose leading advocates were Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton—Catholic traditionalists and prominent literary figures in England. Shortly thereafter, Ransom left Vanderbilt, and he and the other Agrarians turned entirely to their literary and academic preoccupations, although a number of them continued to engage in social commentary and political activism on an individual basis. Davidson never ceased to hope for further collective efforts to implement an Agrarian program.

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